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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000897

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Deputy Secretary Steinberg's September 27, 2009 Luncheon
with Vietnamese Intellectuals, Editors, and Academics

REF: HANOI 827

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CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Michalak, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (U) September 27, 2009; 12:30 p.m.; The Ambassador's Residence;
Hanoi

¶2. (SBU) Participants:

U.S.

The Deputy Secretary

Ambassador Michael Michalak

Joseph Donovan, EAP Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary

Scot Marciel, EAP Deputy Assistant Secretary

Rear Admiral Charles Leidig, Joint Chiefs of Staff

Amb. Joseph DeTrani, Directorate of National Intelligence

Derek Mitchell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense

Pamela Park, Special Assistant to the Deputy Secretary

Virginia Palmer, Deputy Chief of Mission

James A. Warren, Public Affairs Officer (Notetaker)

VIETNAM

Dr. Nguyen Thai Yen Huong, Dean of Post Graduate Study, Diplomatic
Academy of Vietnam

Dr. Hoang Ngoc Giao, Deputy Director, Center for Legal Research and
Services, Vietnam National University, Hanoi

Nguyen Anh Tuan, Publisher and Editor in Chief, VietnamNet

Pham Kim Ngan, Editor, VEV3, Vietnam Television

Cu Chi Loi, Director, Vietnam Institute of American Studies

Dr. Le Dang Doanh, Senior Economist

¶3. (C) SUMMARY: On September 27, the Ambassador hosted a lunch for the Deputy Secretary with a group of Vietnamese intellectuals, editors, and academics, including one of the founders of the recently dissolved Institute of Development Studies. The wide-ranging discussion was dominated by the Vietnamese guests' concerns about China's increasingly assertive role in the region and about tightening restrictions on dissent. Two suggested China might be behind the current restrictions, noting that many of those arrested had been critical of China or Chinese investment in Vietnam. All urged the United States to strengthen engagement with both ASEAN and Vietnam as an important counterbalance to Chinese influence. They stressed that well-publicized engagement in all areas -- governance, military-military, demining, the environment, health, etc. -- was essential to build trust and create greater space for Vietnam's nascent and increasingly embattled civil society. END SUMMARY.

Crackdown on Public Expression of Views

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¶4. (C) The Deputy Secretary opened the discussion by noting U.S. concerns about recent tightening of restrictions on the press and civil society. Dr. Le Dang Doanh, a former advisor to the late Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, noted that the independent think tank that he and a group of reform-minded economists had founded, the Institute for Development Studies, had been forced to close its doors earlier this month as a result of a Prime Ministerial decree ("Article 97") that places onerous restrictions on research and scientific institutions (reftel). All the guests expressed concern about the effect of the decree on research and development, academic freedom and NGOs, many of whom will be forced to reregister or associate with one of Vietnam's (quasi-government) Fatherland Front organizations. They lamented that IDS would not be able to continue its series of widely attended seminars on the importance of civil society in Vietnam. Doanh said Vietnamese can no longer publish criticism of the government or speak critically on behalf of an organization, but were still free to criticize government policy directly to the government (a riskier undertaking).

¶5. (C) Nguyen Anh Tuan, the founder of Vietnam's largest on-line source of news, agreed, noting the recent arrest of one of his reporters for her blogging activities and describing how hard it was for his organization to survive in the current restrictive environment. Dr. Nguyen Thai Yen Huong said that it wasn't just independent researchers that were confused: she and her colleagues at the MFA-affiliated Diplomatic Academy were forced to censor themselves in the absence of clear guidelines about what was acceptable and what was not. Law professor Hoang Ngoc Giao, who heads an independent research group, said Vietnam had a variety of civic and professional associations (most under the "leadership" of the Communist Party), but fewer and fewer fora for influencing public policy. He said the current climate had forced his prestigious Vietnam National University to walk away from a Finnish-funded program to review the performance of Vietnam's executive branch.

16. (C) Toan highlighted concerns widely shared both within government and among the public about poor quality Chinese imports, the use of Chinese labor and material in Chinese investments (particularly in bauxite mining in the still sensitive Central Highlands), and China's assertive behavior in disputed areas of the South China Sea. Toan and others in the group criticized the Government of Vietnam (GVN) for what they described as a weak response to the Chinese detention of Vietnamese fishermen during a unilateral Chinese fishing ban this spring and summer. They also claimed that the GVN had acquiesced to demands from Chinese diplomats in Hanoi that journalists who wrote or published articles critical of China be fired. Doanh described swift Ministry of Public Security action to shut down the road and hustle participants away when, young people in the crowd at Hanoi's National Day celebrations unveiled T-shirts saying "The Spratleys Belong to Vietnam." Some guests attributed Vietnam's weak response to corruption and the involvement of senior officials' families in business dealings with China. Contrasting current circumstances with Vietnam's close association with the Soviet Union during Vietnam's 1979 border war with China, Giao noted that Vietnam today lacked a strong international backer on which it could rely in a confrontation with China.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

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17. (C) Anxieties notwithstanding, the guests were generally optimistic both for their country and its relationship with the United States, citing improved education and the continuing development of trade and the private sector. The group also agreed that the government was fighting a losing battle in its efforts to restrict access to the Internet. Several of the guests cited what they described as an especially important article that appeared on a recent blog calling for a "National Party" with the country's interests at heart, rather than a Communist Party that puts the Party's interests first. They laughed reciting a saying making the rounds in Vietnam today: "We can align ourselves with the United States and say goodbye to the Party, or align ourselves with China and say goodbye to the country."

18. (SBU) When the Deputy Secretary asked for recommendations for U.S. engagement in the region, all agreed that it was important for the United States to remain engaged across the board, saying programs on governance, war legacy issues, health, environmental protection and climate change, and military cooperation helped build trust and reassure the Vietnamese government and public that the United States values the bilateral relationship. Two specifically suggested that the United States should take a stronger position in asserting the importance of freedom of navigation. The guests encouraged the United States to better publicize its actions to ensure that Vietnamese are aware of the ways that their country benefits from its relationship. Several asked the United States to promote more private-sector linkages and help U.S. civil society organizations work directly with their Vietnamese counterparts, particularly in sensitive areas where USG participation might generate unwelcome suspicion. Even seemingly technical projects can have broader positive consequences, Professor Giao suggested, citing two Vietnamese American Fulbright professors whose intellectual property rights classes had provoked discussion among students and professors about individual and constitutional rights. Giao also said the GVN welcomed all types of legal aid and "access to justice" projects, even those on the controversial subject of land-use law. These projects helped students understand local communities better and had a huge impact on developing the rule of law, Giao said. All of these programs, the guests agreed, deepened trust and created much needed space for

Vietnam's nascent and embattled civil society.

¶9. (U) The Deputy Secretary cleared this message.
Palmer